

The best teachers often give us the hardest lessons - and because they are good teachers, we don't mind so much. And I don't think any of us would quarrel with the suggestion that Jesus was, among many other things, a good teacher; patient, compassionate; authoritative; persistent - full of 'second chances'. He had even hand-picked his core group of students (not always the sign of a good teacher - playing favourites is discouraged, but we'll let that slide for a moment).

Good teachers have the ability to create excitement (and draw crowds), and Jesus is certainly doing that; drawing people to himself, feeding them, and sharing his insights with them into the kingdom of God and all that...but finally we've reached a lesson that the once eager crowds are finding hard to swallow.

It starts out innocently - bread from heaven and hunger fully satisfied (and who doesn't want that...?) - But this business of 'eating Jesus' flesh and drinking his blood...'the metaphor starts to sound menacing, the authorities are starting to pay attention, and not everyone is so keen any more. They declare it "difficult" teaching. Jesus declares them "offended". And it's about to get harder; more offensive.

Jesus is playing with religious fire. Claiming a special relationship with God, and offering to share that relationship - that intimacy - that 'one-ness'...it's close to blasphemy, and hard to hear for a people accustomed to keeping God at a safe distance. And now, standing there, daring you to believe - calling you to follow - the bread from heaven; the light of the world; God's anointed. It's too much.

"Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him." The author of John's gospel wants us to know that, even in Jesus' day, when ideas about God are concerned, there's no middle ground. People won't sit easily on the fence; they either believe, or they bail. Declarations by Jesus (or about Jesus) are still divisive. Calls to examine our ideas about God have (over the centuries) drawn people into all kinds of conflict. Divisions over the finer details of doctrine and dogma have accelerated the demise of religious institutions. Because of this, many who once believed, followed, or just hung around the edges for the sake of curiosity, have turned away, and no longer show any interest in the habits of the church.

This watershed moment in John's gospel reflects the reality of the first century after the resurrection. A community of faith was emerging apart from its Jewish roots. The followers of Jesus were seen as a people apart. They were small and determined. They were developing an identity that focused on their willingness to 'believe the unbelievable. They were living examples of Simon Peter's (strange) expression of devotion: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life...'

Peter wasn't being sarcastic. He wasn't trying to promote a cause, or win followers to his side. This declaration is born out of frustration with the nitpickers and the nay-sayers. Peter and the twelve may not fully understand what Jesus is getting at, but they are convinced that he is leading them on a hope-filled journey. In a world of many options, Jesus offers the option that matters.

The church today is consumed by the question of decline. People don't 'join us in worship'. Our young people don't know the stories that matter to us. Faith is an afterthought, or a bogeyman – something to be ridiculed or feared. We have produced programs and offered excuses to persuade and cajole. And people continue to keep their distance. "It's not relevant..." they say; "I'm not religious..." It's too hard to keep your 'rules'...the church only wants my money...my 'life' is my business." I've heard these (and many variations) from folks whose stories began with baptism, Sunday school, confirmation and (quite often) a church wedding. They should be here! (we say) They belong to us! (we cry). And this may be true. But we cannot convince anyone to follow us if we are not following Jesus.

That does not mean living lives of absolute purity. It does not mean creating and/or enforcing rules that govern morality or condemn humanity. People leave/ignore/ridicule the church because, when it comes to ethics and morality, the church has held them to standards that it refuses to apply to itself. The church decided, somewhere along the way, that its job (as an institution of high public profile) was to teach people about Jesus. We do that fairly well - stories and songs that resonate, programs that engage, and of course, a Sunday morning presence, just in case you need a refresher.

What has been difficult for the institution is to 'make it personal' To bring Jesus into the community - into the coffee shop - into the hospital - into the streets. What we fail to do, is share the wonder that comes from following the One whose

words are life itself. What we need to do is point to the peace that comes from finding God present in the middle of our human mess.

There are many options for personal approval and satisfaction. There are many ways to live the 'spiritual but not religious' life. The institutional church can make it hard to follow Jesus – throwing regulations and guidelines in your face; offering obscure explanations for holy mysteries; presenting ritual without linking it to reality. But we can make it easy to follow Jesus if we want. We can reflect the joy and delight that comes from discovering that God cares enough to be present. We can worship for reasons that can't be explained. Rather than telling people to follow – 'offer this prayer - take Jesus 'into your heart' (whatever that means) and you're saved - we can point to the signs of life that Jesus has planted in us; joy and compassion; love and mercy. These are printed clearly on those who choose to follow Jesus.

His path is not the simplest - not filled with easy answers nor with constant affirmation - when God is revealed in Jesus, it is complicated and our ideas about how the world works are turned upside down. But if it's life we seek - abundant and lasting and full of life, there is no where else we can go but Jesus.